

SAHA to ban smoking in public housing

People won't be allowed to light up in own homes.

By Karisa King

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To the list of places where smokers no longer will be able to light up — government buildings, parks, restaurants and bars — public housing residents in San Antonio soon will add one more: their own homes.

The San Antonio Housing Authority plans to impose a new policy in January that will prohibit residents from smoking indoors or away from designated outdoor spots at all 70 of its public sites.

The ban, which will affect about 15,800 residents, aims to protect nonsmokers from secondhand smoke and follows a growing nationwide trend to eliminate smoking at public housing authorities.

Since 2009, when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a directive that “strongly” encouraged housing authorities to adopt nonsmoking policies, the number of agencies that have banned the practice has more than doubled to an estimated 250, according to the Smoke Free Environments Law Project, a Michigan nonprofit that tracks the number.

San Antonio will become the biggest housing authority in Texas and one of the largest in the country to adopt a smoking ban, joining other major agencies in Boston, Detroit, Portland and Seattle.

“It’s our responsibility to provide a living environment that’s healthy, safe and comfortable and, frankly, your neighbor’s smoke can often impair that,” said Melanie Villalobos, a spokeswoman for SAHA.

The no-smoking rule will debut here in August or September at the newly renovated Lewis Chatham Apartments, a single, four-story building for the elderly on the South Side.

No-smoking poll

Of the 6,029 surveys sent to residents in public housing in January, about 200 tenants responded. The results of the poll show that the vast majority of residents support a ban on smoking inside apartments run by the San Antonio Housing Authority.

	Yes	No	N/A
If you are a non-smoker, does smoke bother you?	143	48	11
If you are a smoker, would you agree not to smoke in the apartment building and adhere to any non-smoking provisions in your lease agreement?	91	32	77
Will you move out of a SAHA property if it is a non-smoking complex?	33	142	16
Is a designated smoking area away from the complex but still on the property acceptable to you?	135	50	16
If you are a smoker, do you feel that living in a smoke free community will increase your chances of giving up smoking?	86	37	78

Source: San Antonio Housing Authority

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SAHA's other properties are expected to go smoke-free in January, but the details of how the new policy will work at each site, including the locations of designated smoking areas, remain undetermined.

Residents will be prohibited from smoking within about 20 feet of exterior doorways, and those who repeatedly violate the rule could face eviction.

The housing authority began putting out the word about the new policy earlier this year, opening the discussion at resident meetings and surveying tenants.

Later this month, the housing authority plans to launch an educational campaign about the hazards of smoking and secondhand smoke. Residents who want to quit the habit also can get free smoking-cessation aids such as patches and lozenges, provided through the agency's partnership with the American Cancer Society.

The housing authority put off a planned start date in July after studying how other agencies had dealt with the issue. Among the most important lessons was that residents were more agreeable to the change if they had time to prepare and received health information.

“The education campaign is the most important part,” said Lori Mendez, the housing director for the elderly and disabled who has spearheaded the effort. “Residents need to understand the expectations.”

Kids exposed to smoke

Many residents have yet to hear about the change, but so far the new policy has inspired a mix of strong support, ambivalence and anger.

A survey sent to all 6,029 households in January shows that a large majority of tenants support the no-smoking policy. Of the 200 residents who responded, 81 percent said they liked the idea, while 17 percent opposed it, and 2 percent said they had no opinion.

In some cases, smokers decried what they view as a violation of their rights.

“This is my house even though I’m receiving help from SAHA, and I should be able to smoke in my own home if I want to,” one resident wrote.

Another resident who smokes on the balcony suggested forcing residents to go outside would put them at risk.

“It’s dangerous enough at daytime. Understand that you will be putting people’s lives in danger,” the tenant wrote.

But many cheered the idea, and some smokers even welcomed the change as an inducement to help them quit.

“I think it’s really, really great. I want to stop,” said Norma Garcia, 47, who smokes about a pack a day inside her Wheatley Courts apartment on the East Side. “They’re doing something that’s for our own good.”

Most comments came from residents like Zelda Medelez, 55, at Wheatley Courts, who complained about the nuisance and health risks of living in close-quarters with smokers.

“The secondhand smoke is terrible. If I wanted to smoke I would smoke,” Medelez said. “You can smell it in the apartments.”

Recent studies have shown secondhand smoke migrates into apartments through vents and air ducts.

According to a study published online in the medical journal *Pediatrics* in December, children who live in multifamily housing are exposed to secondhand smoke at greater levels than children living in detached houses, even in cases when no one smoked in their apartment.

The surgeon general has ruled that no level of exposure to tobacco smoke is safe. Every year,

secondhand smoke causes an estimated 46,000 deaths from heart disease among non-smoking adults in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And about 3,400 adults who don't smoke die annually from lung cancer caused by secondhand smoke, the agency says.

In public housing, the benefits of smoke-free homes may be more pronounced. Low-income children face higher rates of asthma and about 30 percent of adults smoke, compared with about 20 percent of those who live above the poverty level, said Donna White, spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Nationally, public housing is home to more than 1.2 million residents, including large numbers of children and elderly, with about 39 percent of tenants younger than 18, and 15 percent older than 62.

Rey Ramirez, president of the resident council at Westway Apartments on Culebra Road, said his elderly grandmother, who suffered from severe asthma and used an oxygen tank, had to contend with heavy secondhand smoke from a downstairs neighbor before she left the apartments because of health troubles.

"You can smell it — it's very, very strong," Ramirez said. "It's just common sense to get rid of it."

Smoke-free trend

The crackdown in public housing coincides with a stricter anti-smoking city ordinance that takes effect in August and prohibits smoking in all bars, restaurants and public places, including parks and bus stops.

It also comes at a time of increasingly aggressive public health initiatives launched by Mayor Julián Castro, who has overseen the city's new B-cycle bike share program and created a Fitness Council to look at new ways to encourage healthy living and spend \$15.6 million in federal stimulus funds intended to reduce childhood obesity.

The national trend to go smoke-free in public housing puts agencies like SAHA at the forefront of a broader movement to take the fight against tobacco smoke into the private sphere.

Consumer demand for nonsmoking homes continues to rise, and more private landlords are learning that smoking bans make good business sense, said Jim Bergman, director of Smoke-Free Environments Law Project.

"Apartment owners are now recognizing that nonsmokers make up 80 (percent) to 85 percent of the adult population, and many smokers also don't smoke in their apartments because they don't want their clothes to smell," Bergman said.

In recent years, about 10 to 15 local governments in California have joined the movement, banning smoking in private apartment developments in their municipalities, he said.

California is the only state where local governments have adopted such ordinances. In Texas, few

private landlords — less than 5 percent by Bergman's estimate — have gone to smoke-free apartments.

Health benefits for residents are the driving force behind the new restrictions, but non-smoking policies also reduce the risk of fires and offer financial perks.

Housing authorities can save more than six times the turnover costs to clean stained walls and window blinds and repair ducts and carpets damaged by cigarettes, according to a 2009 poll of housing authorities by Smoke-Free Housing New England. The cost of rehabilitating a nonsmoking unit is about \$560, compared with about \$1,810 for a light smoking unit and \$3,515 where there was heavy smoking, the poll found.

But not everyone is convinced the housing authority will see much savings or success with the policy.

Is it enforceable?

The president of Wheatley Courts resident council, Sean Henry, said he's one of the few smokers in the East Side complex of about 250 units who takes his habit outside. He said it's hard to envision a day when his neighbors no longer smoke in their homes.

"What's amazing to me is that they're trying to stop people from smoking cigarettes in their own apartments when they can't even stop people from doing drugs," he said.

One of his neighbors, Chris Tatum, who smokes on his porch, said many tenants keep to themselves and wouldn't have much incentive to report other residents.

"There's no way they can control it," he said.

Some experts concede that enforcement of such rules can be tricky, but housing officials said extensive public education campaigns like the one SAHA has undertaken boost support for the change.

"That's really what makes these policies easier to enforce because they're creating a community standard," said Sunia Zaterman, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Council of Large Public Housing Authorities.

Smoking restrictions are no harder to police than prohibitions on other types of activities that break the law, such as having illegal firearms in the home, she said.

In San Antonio, those who don't comply with the rule could ultimately face eviction, but housing officials said they don't foresee having to take that step. Residents first would receive a series of progressively stronger warnings.

In some ways, the policy might be even easier to enforce than other lease violations.

"Your smoke will give you away," SAHA spokeswoman Villalobos said.

In Corpus Christi, where the housing authority banned smoking at its 1,800 units in October, the switch has gone smoothly, said [Joanna Moreno](#), executive vice president for the agency.

Complaints about neighbors smoking are infrequent. In two cases, property managers had to speak to households about persistent smoking, but those residents now are complying with the rule, Moreno said.

“It’s been very successful,” she said.

Like the vast majority of housing agencies that have so far restricted smoking, the Corpus Christi authority oversees far fewer units than San Antonio.

Bergman, who tracks housing authorities that have gone smoke-free, said San Antonio will become the largest agency in the country to impose such a ban.

He predicted that San Antonio’s example would inspire other major housing agencies in Texas and elsewhere to adopt similar rules.

“The fact that it’s such a large housing authority will undoubtedly have an impact,” he said.

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